

VILLAIN 176

Chapter 176 The True Trial

—Frey Starlight's Pov—

"Professor Phoenix..."

The greatest prodigy of the previous generation now stood before me.

Phoenix stared silently at the scattered students of the third year around us.

Some were already dead.

Others had lost limbs—severed arms, half-bitten necks, spilled entrails lying next to torn-open bodies.

Those who survived... were mentally broken.

"How dismal..."

Phoenix wondered if his intervention had even been necessary.

As for me, I showed no reaction.

"Will this affect my exam?"

I asked what had been on my mind from the beginning.

He shook his head.

"It won't. It'll be considered part of the trial."

The teleportation magic resumed now that the Menses Nightmares were dead.

The bodies vanished, leaving only blood and filth behind.

Phoenix turned his glowing eyes back to me with a faint smile.

"Frey Starlight... that was a devilish plan you used against them."

Was he watching from the start?

I couldn't gauge his tone, so I responded cautiously.

"I simply used whatever I had... to win."

Phoenix nodded.

"So you rely on cold logic, doing whatever it takes to come out on top, huh? Truly... you resemble your father."

It was the second time he'd mentioned that man.

"Abraham Starlight... my father. Did you know him?"

"No... I was just a foolish child when Abraham left this world."

We walked together, moving away from the scorched nest of the Nightmares.

"Then how can you say we're alike?"

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't bothered.

Because Abraham wasn't my real father.

Not my real family.

My real father... was somewhere far from this world.

So no matter how great the man was, I didn't want to be compared to someone I'd never met.

We were strangers—nothing more.

Phoenix looked up.

The rain had stopped, but thunderclouds loomed above, ready to pour again at any moment.

I watched with interest as Phoenix gathered a tremendous amount of aura between his thumb and middle finger, igniting his fingertips in flame.

And then, without warning—

Snap.

He snapped his fingers, unleashing a fiery blast that shot up into the sky.

I stared, astonished, as the fireball pierced the clouds, revealing a starlit sky surrounding the moon.

The explosion drew countless gazes, but Phoenix didn't care.

He just stared at the stars above.

The clouds would soon return.

But for a moment, I fixated on that sky I hadn't clearly seen in a week.

"Abraham was like a star... always up there."

Phoenix spoke, recalling memories of his childhood.

"A star so bright it outshined the Sunlight family and the Emperor himself.

What do you think a child growing up under that brilliance would feel?"

He chuckled, his face showing an expression I couldn't read.

"Of course, I admired him. He was my inspiration, the goal I set before me... no, it was more than that. I was obsessed."

I was stunned by what I was hearing.

Right now, Phoenix didn't look like an SS-rank monster.

He looked like someone my age, enjoying a chat about his idol.

The way he talked—like a kid talking about his favorite player—was so human.

Phoenix was that kind of person... showing me that side of himself.

"Because I was obsessed with him... Even though we only met a few times, I can see things others can't."

He spoke with such conviction, I had no room to deny it.

"I don't know much about you, Frey... but your expression, your actions, your body language..."

Phoenix smiled.

"It's like I'm seeing a younger Abraham. You're just like him."

I frowned for a second, but kept a straight face.

"I wonder about that. From my point of view, you seem more like his son than I do."

Phoenix stared at me. Maybe he misunderstood my words.

No—he definitely did.

"Talent isn't everything, Frey Starlight. Remember that."

Maybe he was referring to my officially recorded A-rank talent.

Did he think I said that because I was insecure?

"I'll keep your words in mind."

I didn't bother correcting the misunderstanding.

It was better this way.

Phoenix realized he'd stayed too long.

"Any more and we'll both be in trouble..."

He mumbled, and his body began to glow.

"It was a short meeting, but I'm glad I met you. Son of Abraham... hold on and face this trial to the end!"

I nodded respectfully.

"Thank you for your words, Professor Phoenix. Until we meet again."

And just like that—he vanished.

Not even my Hawk Eyes could follow his movements.

I turned away, frowning.

"Do I really resemble that man?"

I clenched my fists and dashed back into the forest.

"That's not even funny..."

Don't try to tie me to this cursed world.

I'm not a part of it.

That night, I fought like a madman.

This world kept trying to bind me with its threads—

And I had to cut them, again and again.

To reject it.

And to do that—

"I have to win."

No matter what it takes.

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Far from where Frey Starlight was...

Ivar watched the unfolding events on the island with quiet curiosity.

"The time is almost here..."

The professors standing behind him hesitated.

And they weren't alone.

Dozens of Imperial mages and high-ranking individuals were present in that place.

Beyond the grand hall, the defeated students were dragged in—one after another.

Some were unharmed... others disfigured... and some were already dead.

The trial had been nothing short of deadly.

Which is why, in this very moment, hesitation gripped them all.

"Forgive me, Lord Ivar, but... are you truly certain about this?"

Ivar gave a firm nod.

"Do it."

"But... releasing something like that on first-year students is a bit..."

"Do you want me to repeat myself?"

"...No."

The senior professor behind him hesitated briefly, before yielding with a reluctant sigh.

"Let's just hope Phoenix and the other professors are enough... in case anything goes wrong."

The old man muttered, while Ivar turned his gaze toward the entity placed upon the island.

"This is the only way... for them to survive what lies ahead."

The temple heads... maybe they were all madmen.